

ROUNDTABLE

The Memory of Southern European Dictatorships in Popular TV Shows

Kostis Kornetis 

Historia Contemporanea, Universidad Autonoma de Madrid, Madrid 28049, Spain
konstantinos.kornetis@uam.es

Ever since the ground-breaking historical mini-series *Holocaust* (1978), television has proven to play a major role in structuring the collective memory about the past.¹ This medium has, moreover, displayed a capacity to trigger a collective rendering of, and coming to terms with, painful, hidden or forgotten aspects of the past. Media specialist Garry R. Edgerton has even argued that ‘television is the principal means by which most people learn about history’.² Even though such assertions might be tempered by today’s predominance of social media – especially in generational terms – an inquiry into the politics of memory in popular television is still relevant for the field of public history, as well as for memory studies. This is particularly pertinent when representing dictatorship in the European South. Alongside public history projects of all kinds (including museums, memorials, commemorative plaques and practices), filmic representations (be it for cinematic or television use) structure the collective imaginary about the recent past. This essay briefly discusses TV shows that deal with and shape public understandings of the dictatorships in Spain (the final phase of Francoism, post-1968), Greece (the Colonels’ dictatorship, post-1969) and Portugal (the final phase of the *Estado Novo* (New State), post-1968).

One of the most popular and successful depictions of that period was the Spanish *Cuéntame cómo pasó* [‘Tell me how it happened’, 2001–present], a series that looked at the landslide events of late Francoism and the transition to democracy through the lens of an ‘average’ family. The series proved to be an enormously successful franchise that was exported to Portugal, Argentina and Chile, representing the local experiences of late authoritarianism across time and space through the lens of ‘everyday life’; consumerism, private life, gender and inter-generational issues turned into central components in this sort of rendering. The appeal of such depictions of that particular time in history is revealed through the fact that the same concept is currently experiencing a re-adapted afterlife in Greece with *Ta kalytera mas chronia* [‘Our best years’, 2020], directed by commercially successful film director Olga Malea, on the seven years of the Colonels’ dictatorship through a similar perspective. ‘These are the Antonopoulos, good people despite their whims. They all eat together, shout, rejoice, quarrel; and at the end of the day they love each other; they [are] a normal, average family in the Sixties’, says the child narrator in the Greek series.

It is important here to differentiate between the two contexts: in Spain the appearance of *Cuéntame* coincided with a broader opening-up to issues of Francoism in Spanish society, including the civil war legacy and the so-called ‘historical memory’ boom post-2000. While the series was praised for its originality, it was equally attacked by media analysts for catering to nostalgia at a time in which a major debate was emerging on the silences about the Spanish past, and for putting forward this

¹ See Wulf Kansteiner, ‘Entertaining Catastrophe: The Reinvention of the Holocaust in the Television of the Federal Republic of Germany’, *New German Critique*, 90 (2003), 135–62, 144.

² Gary R. Edgerton, ‘Television as Historian: A Different Kind of History Altogether’, in Gary R. Edgerton and Peter C. Rollins, eds., *Television Histories. Shaping Collective Memory in the Media Age* (Lexington: Kentucky University Press, 2001), 1–16, 1–2.

dubious concept of ‘ordinary people’ in a country with great social, political, linguistic, and other cleavages.³

In Greece, *Ta kalytera mas chronia* (which incidentally was the Greek translation of Sidney Polack’s signature 1974 romantic drama film *The Way We Were*, featuring Barbra Streisand and Robert Redford) came out during the COVID pandemic, which ensured high audience ratings. While the series coincided with a more academic talk on public history and Greek television,⁴ it did not seem to produce or reinforce any broader, collective rendering with the past. It falls, nevertheless, within some of the parameters set by political scientist Stathis Kalyvas, who in a polemical article in 2017 spoke about the country’s reluctant modernisation during the 1970s despite or perhaps because of the junta. The article triggered much criticism due to its risqué counterfactual argument: would Greece have become the solid democracy that it did had it not been for the unpleasant interval of the dictatorship that helped accelerate social and political modernisation?⁵

The structure of *Ta kalytera mas chronia* is identical to its Spanish counterpart: a lower-middle-class family with three kids, a teenage son currently in his first year in Law School, a slightly older daughter who is experiencing a sexual awakening of sorts, a maternal grandmother who represents the older generation, and the narrator, an eight-year-old son and youngest member of the family. In all cases politics is relegated to the backdrop, even though it is clear that it punctuates everyday life, offering useful contextualisation.

Television plays a central role in the story, not so much as a consumer object but as a rallying medium within the petty-bourgeois/lower-middle-class households. While Spain already enjoyed a developed television culture in the 1960s, TV sets only made their way into Greek households by the end of the decade and into the early 1970s, coinciding with the years of the Colonels’ regime consolidation – through TED (Television of Armed Forces/*Tileorasis Enoplou Dynameon*), later on renamed YENED (Broadcasting Agency of the Armed Forces/*Ypiresia Enimeroseos Enoplou Dinameon*), a militaristic residue that survived the transition to democracy.⁶ Hence the Greek series kicks off in 1969 instead of 1968, as that was the year TV was officially introduced, covering the moon landing, and following a canon of sorts in Greek filmic depictions. The Spanish series too features in its promotional episode and posters the happy Alcantara family gathered around a television set to watch the 1968 Eurovision song contest in which Spain won with Serrat’s song ‘La la la’. A device laid out by *Cuéntame* and followed by its Greek copycat with repercussions in terms of how the narrative and imagery of the past is constructed is the fact that each episode opens up with brief footage of the time. The opening images include a panorama of the modern city, an avant-garde exhibition, new electric devices, or an athletic event, containing the standard recognisable voice-over and intonation of a bygone era, in this way establishing the episode’s respective theme. Television thus functions as propaganda, as technological achievement, as a media outlet window capturing Marshall McLuhan’s ‘global village’, but above all as the average family’s common means of getting together in the modern household. In the words of a critic this is emulated by the contemporary families watching the show: ‘[*Cuéntame*] gathers the family around the TV to talk about our shared past.’⁷

³ See Jo Labanyi, ‘Review’, *Screen*, 48/3, 2007, 291.

⁴ In particular Vasilis Vamvakas and Kleio Kenterelidou, eds., *Χρόνια Ελληνική Έντυπη Διαφήμιση, 1945–2015. Καταναλωτική κουλτούρα, κοινωνικά πρότυπα, στρατηγικές επικοινωνίας* (Thessaloniki: Epikentro, 2021). Vasilis Vamvakas and Grigoris Paschalidis, eds., *50 χρόνια ελληνική τηλεόραση* (Athens: Epikentro, 2018); also Vamvakas and Panayiotopoulos, *Η Ελλάδα στη Δεκαετία του 80. Κοινωνικό, πολιτικό και πολιτισμικό λεξικό* (Athens: Perasma, 2010).

⁵ Stathis N. Kalyvas, ‘Μια παράδοξη κληρονομιά’ [A paradoxical heritage], *Kathimerini*, 18 June 2017. The quote that triggered the controversy was the following: ‘The process of social modernization had, of course, begun before the dictatorship, but the latter accelerated it knowing that its acceptance to a large extent depended on economic growth and reinforced the tendency of people to seek happiness in the private sphere’.

⁶ It is no coincidence, therefore, that this fascinating story comes out strongly in filmic depictions of the Greek dictatorship: both Kostas Kapakas’ *Uranva* (2006) and the *Loafing and Camouflage* series (based on the eponymous and extremely influential comedy from 1984) focus on the military regime’s connection to television.

⁷ Glen Creeber, *Serial Television: Big Drama on the Small Screen* (London: British Film Institute, 2004), 14.

Both series were praised for a truthful representation that goes beyond clichés, emphasising elements such as modernisation (instead of backwardness) or the potentially political strength of the personal (following the famous eponymous 1970s slogan ‘the personal is political’). But they were also heavily criticised by analysts. In both cases criticism evolved around the fact that precisely through their capacity to penetrate facets of everyday life under dictatorship, the series catered to a certain aestheticisation of the ‘long 1960s’. This particular decade has been already canonised and in fact lends itself easily to facile and un-reflexive reconstructions that focus on Beatlemania, mini-skirts, mod aesthetics, and flower power, instead of the pervading Cold War context, the odious Vietnam War, the omnipresent anti-communism, or the more local aspects of dictatorships and their folklore.

A nostalgia for a bygone era of supposed innocence emanates from this depiction. Since nostalgia is based on selectivity and sanitisation of the past, this precise feature was often criticised as a sign of idealisation and even depoliticisation, concealing the uglier and more brutal side of life in a dictatorship.⁸ Despite the fact that all key events of the late 60s and early 70s do make a powerful (or less powerful) appearance in the series (including political assassination attempts, student occupations, etc.), a standard complaint is that these only serve as mere devices for the plot to advance.

At the same time, however, one might argue that what these series achieved is to inscribe the personal, little histories within the greater events – bringing microhistory into the living room; after all, fiction is a privileged field for reconstructing everydayness. Materiality, in fact, becomes central here: the *mise-en-scène* pays minute attention to detail in fashion, attire, decoration and furniture that conveys a supposed authenticity, while converting such everyday banal objects as television sets, armchairs, wallpapers, or Vespas into museum pieces⁹ which, in the words of cultural critic Abigail Loxham, indicate a certain ‘progress’. But even beyond aesthetics, the tactics and strategies of survival and the myriad microsocial interactions that are realised on an everyday level under dictatorship, these series suggest, had a powerful effect on how people understood politics, beyond strictly institutional, grassroots or ideological mobilisation.¹⁰ This adds a further, crucial dimension to the study of public history: one needs to move beyond the binary of consent vs. resistance that structured and explained much of our hitherto understanding of precisely such contexts both in historiographic and artistic spheres and explore instead the grey zones, the micro-resistances and the micro-freedoms.¹¹

Even though the Spanish production (the longest in Spanish TV history) established humour as another landmark – with comic gags used throughout as a powerful counterpoint (*contrapunto*) to the often dramatic political unfolding – this comic effect does not always work well in terms of promoting a better understanding of such everyday dynamics. Especially the Greek regime itself was often portrayed in an avalanche of almost identical films in the 2000s as comic and/or farcical, whereby the portrayal focused on the regime’s supposed grotesqueness and ridiculous aspects. Most film directors further tended to revisit those years with an evident sense of nostalgia and a bittersweet disposition for the time of innocence and their own sexual awakenings while coming of age and often disregarded the

⁸ On a theoretical treatise of ‘nostalgia’ see Svetlana Boym’s classic *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2002). On the core critique uttered against representations of 1968 in France and Italy focusing on ‘nostalgia’, see Bernardo Bertolucci’s interview, ‘Dopo la Rivoluzione’, in Daniela Basso, ed., *Il cinema, il Maggio e l’uopia. Les amants réguliers. Percorsi intorno al ‘68* (Turin: Einaudi, 2008), 12–22. Bertolucci, in fact, rejects these blanket accusations voiced against his own *The Dreamers* (2004) and defends the nostalgic vision as legitimate. The RAI-produced Italian drama *La meglio gioventù* (dir. Marco Tullio Giordana, 2003), an arthouse version of the average Italian family throughout the 60s and 70s, was equally criticised, despite critical appraisal and a prize at Cannes.

⁹ Abigail Loxham, ‘Consuming the Past as a Televisual Product: Gender and Consumption in *Cuéntame Cómo Pasó*/ ‘Tell Me How it Was’, in Kostis Kornetis, Eirini Kotsovoli and Nikolaos Papadogiannis (eds), *Consumption and Gender in Southern Europe since the ‘Long 1960s’* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016) 232.

¹⁰ On this issue see Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

¹¹ James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990); also see Kostis Kornetis, *Children of the Dictatorship. Student Resistance, Cultural Politics and the Long 1960s in Greece* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2013).

raw, violent elements of the regime.¹² In Spain too nostalgic representations of the early 1970s constructed a ‘vintage’ pastiche of nostalgia, kitsch and comedy. Novelist Isaac Rosa explains in a recent interview:

Late Francoism is our ‘vintage’. Or rather, it is really our own vintage era, which amuses us all, because it all seems so comical to us. Everything seems comical. ‘Look how they were dressed.’ ‘Look at the things they did with telly.’ ‘Look at the music.’ Hence, we have effectively remained with that pop vision of Late Francoism . . . leaving aside, above all, many conflictive elements which were present, and which remained present later on, in times of democracy.¹³

Rosa uses the term ‘sentimental memory’ to describe such filmic or literary representations – indirectly referring to Manuel Vázquez Montalbán’s emblematic *Sentimental History of the Spanish Transition*.¹⁴

Despite occasional glimpses of regime sympathisers – in both series personified by the father figure’s boss – we get few raw instances or slices of real life in which we can see how the juntas persecuted, censored, tortured, manipulated and repressed in a systematic and methodical way. What we do deduce, nevertheless, which is equally valuable, is that for the vast majority of the population life went on despite all the above: ‘all of this goes together; life, death, terror, joy’, mentions the grandmother figure in the Greek show.

In Portugal, apart from its own version of the *Cuéntame* franchise (*Conta-me como foi* [‘Tell me how it happened’, 2010–]) that follows an almost identical script, *Depois do Adeus* (‘After the farewell’, 2013–) is a show following a similar recipe. It focuses on the so-called *retornados*, namely the 500,000 ‘returnees’ from former Portuguese colonies, most of whom arrived in Portugal in dramatic conditions after the Carnation Revolution of April 1974. The series looks at the Mendonça family, which ‘returned’ to the metropolis after the onset of the Angolan civil war: once again we follow their daily life, their hopes and sorrows, and especially the quite hostile attitude towards them from people in Portugal – a thorny issue up to the present day.¹⁵

Gloria (2021), the first Netflix series produced in Portugal, a much more recent but equally influential series, has a quite different focus. The series deals with the period of the late Salazarist regime, this time through a plot that has little to do with everyday life stories but which is structured instead around a historical thriller drama, of sorts. Through the central character of an engineer who happens to work in the American base outside Lisbon but who also proves to be the son of a Salazarist minister and a Soviet spy, we get to see the complex entanglements of Cold War politics in late 1960s Portugal. Among the most interesting elements here is the powerful paralleling of the brutality of PIDE (the Portuguese regime’s secret police) to that of the KGB and its agents. What stands out, nevertheless,

¹² Kostis Kornetis, ‘From Politics to Nostalgia – and Back to Politics: Tracing the Shifts in the Filmic Depiction of the Greek “Long 1960s” Over Time’, *Historein*, 14, 2 (2014). For a full list of such films see op. cit. Also see on the subject Maria Chalkou, ‘Childhood Memories, Family Life, Nostalgia, and Historical Trauma in Contemporary Greek Cinema’, in Trine Stauning Willert and Gerasimos Katsan, eds., *Retelling the Past in Contemporary Greek Literature, Film, and Popular Culture* (Washington, DC: Lexington Books, 2019), 185–99.

¹³ Interview with the author, June 2017. Also see an elaboration of this idea in Isaac Rosa, *El vano ayer* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 2005), 32.

¹⁴ Manuel Vázquez Montalbán, *Cronica sentimental de la transición* (Madrid: Debolsillo, 2005 [1985]). Fellow Spanish writer Antonio Muñoz Molina is equally critical of this approach by literary and filmic representations; however, he uses the same term (‘sentimental’) to criticise the opposite trend of promoting a Manichean version of recent Spanish history whereby the bad Francoist guys are ‘ugly, gross, macho, sexual maniacs, and animal abusers’: ‘The result of this . . . sentimental brand of memory is forgetfulness about the very thing one is trying to remember’, in this case the period of Francoism and the transition. Antonio Muñoz Molina, ‘Desmemorias’, *El País*, 6 Sept. 2008. Here I am using the translation by Ruth McKay in ‘The Good Fight and Good History: The Spanish Civil War’, *History Workshop Journal*, 70/1 (2010), 204.

¹⁵ On the issue of ‘retornados’ see the recent book by Christoph Kalter, *Postcolonial People. The Return from Africa and the Remaking of Portugal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

are the realistic scenes of the colonial wars which appear in flashback (or in the cases of secondary characters in real time and in juxtaposition to a fiancée or wife left behind). Here there is a multidirectional functioning of memory and events – to quote Michael Rothberg’s famous term, precisely coined apropos of Edgar Morin and Jean Rouch’s documentary *Chronicle of a Summer* (1961), denoting the memorial connections between different histories and their legacies over time. This concept ‘recognizes the dynamic transfers that take place between diverse places and times during remembrance’.¹⁶

Gloria follows a narrative style that departs from the *Cuéntame* model in terms of genre and narrative strategy. First, it does not adopt the common trope of the child perspective but looks at events from an ‘objective’ rather than subjective viewpoint. Its aim – far from rendering the average family’s ‘structure of feeling’ – looks instead at highly special if not unlikely circumstances. Interestingly, it is the only series focusing so much on Cold War antagonism and complexities – and the only one featuring American characters with State Department and/or CIA connections. Through the plotline the series renders in an excellent way Portugal’s dependency on the United States but at the same time the latter’s ambiguous stance vis-à-vis the regime’s colonial vicissitudes. The series touches on both the violent colonial and internal politics of regime while at the same time featuring some standard elements of filmic depiction of the 1960s, focusing on youth and sexuality. The main spy character goes to vibrant clubs and cafes, through which we get a glimpse of the countercultural scene of the time, but at the same time he falls in love with a country girl, married to a young soldier in the war. This love story gives us glimpses of class domination but also of the complexities of women’s lives back home, waiting for men to return from overseas, physically crippled or emotionally altered, or both. Especially the latter has been for decades a taboo issue – all-too-recently tackled head-on by an acclaimed documentary series entitled *A Guerra* (The War), by Joaquim da Silva Furtado (2007–13).

In 2021 a prominent left-wing historian of Portugal, Emanuel Loff, complained that even though events and books on the late stages of dictatorships and the respective democratic transitions have multiplied in recent years, the sum of all of them could not possibly equal the influence and impact of one of those series: the public, after all, becomes ‘educated’ through such low-quality productions, as he concluded.¹⁷ No matter whether one agrees or disagrees both with his verdict on the quality of the series and/or their real or perceived impact on the wider public (open to criticism due to the absence of important variables such as generational criteria), the question remains: to what extent and in what ways do these series structure the way we think of the past? To some extent they do so as they either visualise and therefore reinforce existing preconceptions or challenge them instead. After all, television series with a historical content could mobilise ‘family memory encouraging the younger generation[s] to investigate silenced public and private memories’.¹⁸ Most of the series discussed are directed towards an international as much as a national audience, constructing a specific kind of discourse and representation of the past, affecting the general imaginary on the dictatorships, and the ways in which they converge with or diverge from the burgeoning academic literature on these regimes (and their lacunae).

But what is the role of professional historians in all this? Can they enter into ‘dialogue with’ this pervasive kind of public history? Rather than a direct one (as historical advisors, for instance), I would argue that the role of professional historiography is *indirect*. Recently Kate Ferris and Claudio Hernández Burgos co-edited a special issue of the *European History Quarterly* on the everyday life of dictatorship in Southern Europe, based on the concept put forward by German historian Alf Lüdtke in the 1980s: *Alltagsgeschichte* (history of everyday life). Especially *Cuéntame* and *Ta kalytera mas chronia*, despite their stylising or nostalgic trope, adhere to the capacities or agency of emerging categories as ‘the women’, or ‘the students’, and ‘the complex processes of adaptation and negotiation

¹⁶ Michael Rothberg, ‘The Work of Testimony in the Age of Decolonization: “Chronicle of a Summer”, Cinema Verité, and the Emergence of the Holocaust Survivor’, *PMLA*, 119, 5 (Oct. 2004), 1233–34.

¹⁷ Unpublished paper presented at the ‘Procesos transicionales en el paisaje europeo’ roundtable of the ‘Narrativas de la Transición a la Democracia en España’ conference in Salamanca, 3–4 June 2021.

¹⁸ Loxham, ‘Consuming the Past as a Televisual Product’, 227–39, 232.

that take place in the spaces and practices of daily life',¹⁹ which are precisely the premises promoted by *Alltagsgeschichte*. Filmic representation of course follows its own codes and aesthetic standards, but it also becomes conditioned by the time in which it takes place and its prerogatives. Consciously or not, the wider field that opened up on the cultural history of these regimes and their daily lives is therefore ascribed to and enlarged by these artefacts. At the same time the encroaching presence of war, atrocities and trauma in the Portuguese case, as well as the predominant role of Cold War politics and secret services, through *Gloria*, seems to be as well in dialogue with the gradual opening-up of such themes in academic research. While these series touch on but do not really tackle issues such as the role of the 'awakening' of civil society,²⁰ they do nevertheless reflect current investigations and research directions.

What is more spectacular, however, is that especially *Cuéntame* – apart from all the reasonable critique that was directed against it – seems not to simply align itself to current trends, but instead to have initiated them. The entire turn to material culture during the transitions and a recent major interest in the effects of consumerism and mass tourism during precisely the years post-1968 in Spain, Portugal and Greece followed and did not precede the series. While it is hard to document a direct correlation between the two, there seems to be, nevertheless, once more an indirect 'dialogue' between public and academic history – which for once appear to be complementary rather than antagonistic.

In that sense not only do TV trends benefit from historians, but historians could greatly benefit from TV trends. In other words, they could use constructively this complementarity with non-academic depictions, without focusing only on the hits and misses of a show. The return to everyday life, the focus on micro-histories, and the parallel study of the personal and the political are all perspectives emanating from these shows, on which academic history can reflect and further its scope, using its own refined tools.

¹⁹ Kate Ferris and Claudio Hernández Burgos, "Everyday Life" and the History of Dictatorship in Southern Europe', *European History Quarterly*, 52, 2 (2022), 123–35, 127.

²⁰ See on the Spanish example Pamela Radcliff, *Making Democratic Citizens in Spain. Civil Society and the Popular Origins of the Transition, 1960–78* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).